

Wetlands precious

■ **Puddle Project shows importance of wetlands in the ecosystem and how to monitor and protect them**

BY JOYCE LANGERAK
Penticton Herald

Flickers and killdeers swooped over Max Lake Sunday as a group took in an on-site study during a weekend course on how to protect wetlands.

Hosted by Ducks Unlimited Canada and the B.C. Wildlife Federation, participants from throughout the South Okanagan learned how to monitor and protect the wetlands that are crucial to the survival of many local species.

"We're trying to let people know about the importance of wetlands, big and small," said Wendy Schebel, co-ordinator of the Puddle Project and designer of the weekend course for local land owners.

"Wetlands provide purification," said Schebel. "They improve water quality. Plants filter sediments and pollutants, sometimes even toxins that may be in the water."

Wetlands provide habitat for bats, turtles, mammals, frogs, salamanders, dragonflies, damselflies and any number bird species.

"We only have 15 per cent of wetland habitats left in the South Okanagan, and most of that exists on private land," noted Schebel. "The Wetland Keepers program is focused on individuals and community groups interested in looking after wetlands."

Richard Armstrong of the Penticton Indian Band learned something new — that tiger salamanders can choose to live in water or on land.

"I always thought they were two different species," said Armstrong, a traditional and ecological knowledge keeper who works at the En'owkin Centre on the reserve. "Tiger salamanders, to me in my culture, are two different salamanders." Armstrong is "Now, I found out they're both the same."

Armstrong, who was among 20 people taking in the weekend course, was particularly interested in the aerial mapping segment because the En'owkin Centre is working on restoration of the black cottonwood land on the reserve, a job that will benefit from mapping.

Peter Taylor of Osoyoos came to learn more because he lives adjacent to a wetlands in his community.

"I've been watching these birds out here that really depend upon wetlands," he said. "That's where they breed. I like to have the birds around."

Participants, who included some students, conservation group members and individual land owners, learned to classify the type of wetland on their properties — bog, swamp, shallow open water, fen, marsh. That's determined by the amount of water and the type of vegetation the wetland supports. They learned how to interpret aerial maps to deter-



JOYCE LANGERAK/Penticton Herald

Peter Taylor of Osoyoos and Puddle Project co-ordinator Wendy Schebel discuss aspects of wildlife at a small lake on the West Bench Sunday.

The Tiger Salamander is one of the few salamanders adapted to desert climates.

Like all amphibians, Tiger Salamanders need water to live. However, they have developed incredible techniques to ensure their survival in this arid environment.

Tiger salamanders may resist periods of drought by going underground. During the summer they hide in the cool refuge of abandoned underground mammal burrows or in the hollows of rotting logs.

They can survive the salty, alkaline water that would "pickle" most other animals. When ponds dry up or contain little food, some young salamander larvae turn into cannibals with huge mouths and teeth and may prey on their own species.

Spring may be the best time to catch a rare glimpse of the Tiger Salamander. Adults are rarely seen on the surface of the ground except after a spring shower, or during spring migration from winter burrows to breeding ponds.



Breeding occurs in March through August, in warm ponds, shallow lake edges or slow moving creeks that are near to grassland foraging habitat.

Tiger Salamanders are red-listed in British Columbia due to their small numbers, limited distribution and the rapid development of their habitat for human use.

Many remaining ponds and lakes suitable for breeding habitat exist on private land. Landowners are key to ensuring the continued survival of these salamanders by conserving the natural state of wetlands and adjacent natural areas of shrub-grasslands.

You may glimpse the elusive Tiger Salamander, and many other unique amphibian species in their habitats during one of the more than 85 Meadowlark Festival events in May.

For event information check out meadowlarkfestival.bc.ca, or call 492-5275.

mine the type of vegetation

The course, much of which took place in the classroom, also trained people how to conduct wetland plant and bird surveys, wetland cleanup, and how to raise public awareness.

Data gathered during a field trip to Max Lake will be compiled to help conserve, restore and manage

that area, which is now a conservation area and educational site.

At \$78, the course was heavily subsidized by Ducks Unlimited and its Puddle Project partners. If there is enough demand, Schebel will hold another such workshop. Anyone interested can call her at 490-8246 or toll-free at 1-800-665-3825

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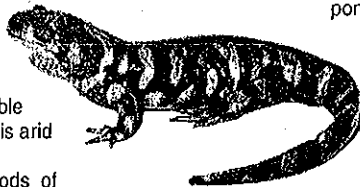
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